

Simeon Of Jerusalem

And His Times

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In passing from the first to the second century of the Christian Era, the most illustrious martyr of Jewish extraction, whose name has been recorded, is Simeon, Bishop of Jerusalem. On the authority of Hegesippus and Eusebius, we are informed that he was the son of Cleophas, brother of Joseph; and consequently was a cousin of our Lord. The exact year of his death is not known, though it is said to have taken place in the reign of Trajan, in the presidency of the consular Atticus, and some time after the death of St. John, the last of the Apostles. We cannot greatly err therefore, if we fix his martyrdom about the year 115. The circumstances which determine our judgement are these. The persecution in which he suffered, is said to have arisen from a popular insurrection. But the earliest Jewish insurrection in the reign of Trajan, was in the year 115. Again we are assured that this memorable man at the time of his death, was one hundred and twenty years of age, and at this fact carries back his birth to five years before the Christian Era, it seems to accord better with his relation to our Lord than an earlier date. Even at this date of his martyrdom, he must have been seventy-five years old when chosen to the pastoral office in the year 70, over the Jerusalem Church, then settled in the city of Pella beyond the Jordan.

The death of such a man, at such an advanced age, awakens some interesting reflections on the history of his times, and especially of the Apostolic Baptist Church, of which he was so long a Pastor. In the absence of the necessary materials for giving his biography in full we hope we shall be pardoned for pursuing the trains of reflection thus suggested.

Born of the family of our Lord, Simeon must have been in his early years a resident with them in Nazareth of Galilee, and intimate with all the persons and incidents with whom we are made acquainted by the four Evangelists. The events of our Lord's early life, the lovely traits of his character in childhood, when "he grew in stature and in wisdom, and in favor with God and man," must have passed under the eye of Simeon to some extent; especially as the death of Joseph, soon after the scenes of the first passover recorded in the second of Luke, brought Mary and Jesus, as Neander suggests, into the family of Cleophas, as their future home. How early he became a disciple of Jesus we can only conjecture from the fact that his father Cleophas, and his mother Mary, the sister of the Virgin, are mentioned repeatedly in the gospels among the early and devoted followers of our Lord, and were honored with the first sight of him after his resurrection. From the account of Luke (Chap.24) we should be tempted to conclude that Cleophas had removed his residence to Emmaus near Jerusalem. This, however, is quite uncertain. Simeon at this time must have been at least thirty-eight years of age. Two of his brothers, James and Jude, were numbered among the twelve Apostles; and though his name is not mentioned, it is by no means improbable that he himself was one of the seventy "other" primitive ministers of Jesus. When the five hundred and ten "brethren" assembled on a mountain in Galilee, he was doubtless present as an eye-witness of his resurrection. With the one hundred and twenty disciples who composed the first members of the Church in Jerusalem, he "continued in prayer and supplication," and shared in the rich largess of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, that ever memorable day that demonstrated the enthronement of our nature in the person of Jesus on the right hand of God. How sublime, how affecting must that demonstration have been, to one who like Simeon, had been the personal associate of Jesus from his youth, in all the endearing familiarities of home and kindred! In all the glorious scenes of conversion, and all the trying scenes of persecution that followed, from the first arrest of Peter

and John, A.D. 62, he bore a part with the primeval Church of Christendom, "built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the corner-stone." Of all the great Missionary enterprises of which the Church of Jerusalem was the primary centre, both of impulse and of intelligence for all that period, nothing escaped him. The internal and external relations of the Church must have been familiar to him in their minutest details. In all that season of critical transition, when Judaism was receiving its full and final development into Christianity, when the old fleshly forms and figures in which the true method of salvation had been typified for ages, were seen to become gradually transfigured and as it were glorified, like the body of Jesus on Mount Tabor, by the effulgence of the new light from Heaven, he was permitted to be present at every stage, and feel every struggle, and watch every change from glory to glory, until by means of Paul's Epistles to the Hebrews, A.D. 63, after the martyrdom of James, the transition was complete.

Of the events to which we have now alluded, we gather our information from the New Testament. The history of the Jerusalem Church is recorded in the Acts with sufficient clearness up to year 50, when the great question of the relations of the Gentile to the Jewish Christian churches was settled, after full deliberation and discussion, by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, with the unanimous consent of the Apostles and Elders and the whole body of believers. From that time all we know of its history for thirteen years is collected from the brief account of Paul's visits, A.D. 54 and 58, in Acts, compared with the Epistles of James, A.D. 61, and of Paul to the Hebrews, A.D. 63. After this latter date we lose the clear light of the New Testament, and are dependent on less certain sources for our knowledge and its subsequent history.

The times were indeed fearful. It seems impossible to doubt that the Christians of Judea, and especially of Jerusalem, must have been affected more or less by the distracted condition of their beloved country. Although well aware from the predictions of Daniel, and Christ himself, of the approaching overthrow of the city and temple, and detached from all trust in the Mosaic ritual as the ground of their acceptance with God, yet neither their knowledge nor their Christian piety could extinguish their patriotism. Their faith must have sometimes saddened as well as habitually supported them under the trials before them, and which every day were thickening around them more and more, from the procuratorship of Felix to that of Florus. In their ears the cry of the poor maniac, (if he were not a prophet), who at the feast of Tabernacles, A.D. 63, began to fill the streets of Jerusalem, day and night, Sabbath and festival, with the mournful sound of "Woe to the city! Woe to the temple!" must have had a meaning of deeper solemnity, than could have been felt by the unbelieving mass of their countrymen, three years before the outbreak of the Roman war, and seven years before tower and wall, palace and pinnacle, portico and sanctuary, fell prostrate before the fury of the Roman conquerors. They knew the "days of vengeance" were at hand, "that all things written might be fulfilled."

The revolt broke out in the city of Cesarea, A.D. 66, in the second year of Gessius Florus, a monster whose crimes Josephus seems unable to find language to portray, and who to conceal them from the knowledge of the Emperor appears studiously to have provoked it, and took no measures whatever to check its early horrors. "Every where," says Josephus, even then "you could see the cities filled with unburied corpses, and the dead bodies of the aged, mixed with those of children and women, not having even the necessary covering of their bodies." At

length Cestius, President of Syria, found it necessary to interfere, and the next year, A.D. 67 in the month of November, Jerusalem was encompassed for the first time by the Roman armies. The conquest of the city was in his power, but bribed by the gold of Florus, the generals of Cestius advised a retreat, which was shamefully effected with heavy loss. At this critical opportunity, the Church of Jerusalem, according to the direction of the Lord, left the devoted city to its fate and fled to Pella beyond the Jordan. Another week, perhaps another day, and their flight would have been intercepted by their own countrymen, who up to that time had not decided upon risking the fearful hazards of war against the gigantic Roman power.

Pella, the chosen place of retreat, has sometimes, we know not why, been called "a small village." It was in fact, however, one of the ten celebrated cities of "Decapolis." In the time of the Maccabees it was inhabited by the Syrians, but was taken by Alexander Jannius, the High Priest and King of the Jews, about one hundred and forty years before this time, and destroyed, because its inhabitants refused to submit to circumcision. It had been rebuilt however with new beauty, and if it bore any proportion to the other cities of Decapolis, particularly Jabesh and Gerasa between which it was situated, must have been large and populous. The ruins of Gerasa, as still seen and described by modern travellers, rise in magnificence with those of Baalbec and Palmyra. Pella was about eighty miles northeast of Jerusalem, and belonged to the jurisdiction of King Agrippa, who took part with the Romans in this war. To this circumstance must perhaps be attributed its safety, as a retreat for the church of Jerusalem. It was situated in one of the finest regions, not only of Palestine, but of the whole world. Nothing can be uninteresting to us, that relates to this chosen spot, where the Mother Church of Christendom found shelter for nearly seventy years, while Jerusalem was sodden with blood, and "Zion was ploughed as a field."

It was here at Pella, A.D. 70, that the election of Simeon to the pastoral office took place. In the account of this fact as given by Eusebius, (B. iii. c. 11) we have a striking example of the manner and degree in which tradition has disfigured history. After the martyrdom of James and the capture of Jerusalem, which immediately followed, the report is that those of the Apostles and disciples of our Lord that were yet surviving, came together from all parts, with those that were related to our Lord according to the flesh. For the greater part of them were yet living. These consulted together, to determine whom it was proper to pronounce worthy to be the successor to James. They all unanimously declared Simeon, the son of Cleophas, of whom mention is made in the sacred volume, as worthy of the episcopal seat there. Heere are almost as many errors as words. For, first, there was an interval of eight years between the martyrdom of James and the capture of Jerusalem. Secondly, there is not a particle of proof that James was ever chosen the Bishop of Jerusalem. He labored there as an Apostle, which is an infinitely higher office. Thirdly, according to this report this important Church was left eight years without any Bishop, though Simeon was there all the time, who was afterwards judged unanimously worthy of the office. Fourthly, we know from the New Testament record that the office of Elder and Bishop is the same, and that the Church of Jerusalem had many such officers as early as A.D. 44; who are mentioned as distinct from the Apostles repeatedly in Acts 15. Fifthly, even if it were true that the surviving Apostles and disciples met at Pella, as here reported after the desolations of the Jewish war, (which is by no means improbable), and it was by them that Simeon was solemnly ordained as a new Bishop of the Church, yet the election to Simeon to

that office, according to all previous precedents set by the Apostles themselves, must have been made by the free popular vote of the members of the Church. It is not to be credited that the Apostles subverted the popular constitution of the Christian Church established by themselves thirty years before, under the authority of Christ, its Head. Lastly, that there were other Bishops in the Church of Jerusalem at this very time, is confirmed by the number of names recorded afterwards by Eusebius (B. iv. c. 5) when speaking of the close of the last Jewish war, in the eighteenth year of the Emperor Hadrian, A.D. 35. The passage is too important to be omitted. "In the meantime, as the Bishops from the circumcision failed, it may be necessary now to recount them in order from the first. The first then was James, called the brother of our Lord; after whom the second was Simeon, the third Justus, the fourth Zaccheus, the fifth Tobias, the sixth Benjamin, the seventh John, the eighth Matthew, the ninth Philip, the tenth Seneca, the eleventh Justus, the twelfth Levi, the thirteenth Ephres, the fourteenth Joseph, and finally, the fifteenth Judas. These are all Bishops of Jerusalem that filled up the time from the Apostles until the above mentioned time, all of the circumcision. Now here are the names of fifteen Bishops of Jerusalem of whom the first two occupy eight years, and the last thirteen, only 20! Every one can see the improbability of this. But if we leave out James, the Apostle, and regard the remaining fourteen not as successive, but as associate Elders of the Church (that is, bishops), we shall undoubtedly arrive at the truth of the case. Indeed, Eusebius himself says, "We have not ascertained in any way, that the times of the Bishops of Jerusalem have been regularly preserved on record. So much however have I learned from writers, that down to the invasion of the Jews under Adrian, there were fifteen successions of Bishops in that Church, &c." The writers of whom he speaks, it seems in this case had no better guide than a vague and corrupted tradition, corrupted to suit the growing spirit of prelatical dominion in the second and third centuries. It is our duty to sift the wheat from the chaff, and thus restore the early history of the Church to its genuine simplicity. "Bible Episcopacy" we believe in, as of Divine authority. All other Episcopacy is of human origin, and of course is not truly catholic, but sectarian.

One would be glad to know whether the terrible destruction of their city and temple by Titus, had any effect upon the surviving Jews, in promoting their conversion to Christianity. But we have no means of determining this question, other than the words of the apostle to the Romans, thirteen years before, in his prophetic view of his nation: "The election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded." "Blindness in part hath happened unto Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in." At least half the nation, probably more of the adult population perished from A.D. 64 to 70. If the positive increase of Christians by conversion was no greater, their relative proportion would be, in their now depopulated country. But with what tears would Christians wander among its ruins!

But they had other work to do. For as Eusebius observes (B. iii. c. 37.) "the most of the disciples at that time, animated by a more ardent love of the Divine word, had first fulfilled the Saviour's precept, by distributing their substance among the needy. Afterwards leaving their country, they performed the office of Evangelists to those who had not yet heard the faith, whilst with a noble ambition to proclaim Christ, they also delivered to them the books of the holy Gospels. After laying the foundation of faith in foreign parts, as the particular object of their mission and after appointing others as pastors of the flocks, and committing to these the care of those they had recently introduced, they went again to other regions and nations, with the grace

and co-operation of God. The Holy Spirit also wrought many wonders as yet through them, so that as soon as the Gospel was heard, men voluntarily and eagerly in crowds, embraced the true faith with their whole minds. As it is impossible for us to give the number of the individuals who became pastors or evangelists, during the first immediate succession from the apostles in the churches throughout the world, we have only recorded those by name in our history, of whom we have received, the traditional account, as it is delivered in the numerous comments on the apostolic doctrines, yet extant." This last sentence of Eusebius is worthy of special notice.

Three times during the pastorate of Simeon, he was exposed to imminent danger, by the jealousy of the royal house of David, entertained by the Roman government. Under Vespasian first, and afterwards under Domitian, and finally Trajan, rumors were spread, which led to the arrest and examination of the surviving members of that now poor and depressed family, of which Simeon was one. The last of these trials was fatal to him, not however as rebelliously disposed but as a Christian. According to Hegesippus, this venerated pastor, together with his nephews, the sons of Jude, was accused before Atticus, the Roman governor, at a time of popular insurrection of the Jews, by the envy of certain heretics. For three days he was put to the torture, which he bore with a serenity that astonished the judge and his attendants in the highest degree. He was at least ordered to be crucified, and at the age of one hundred and twenty years finished his life and labors in like manner as his Lord.

"Great numbers of the circumcision," says Eusebius, "came over to the Christian faith at that time, one of whom, Justus, was his successor." This great revival of religion at Pella, took place we suppose, before, not after, the death of Simeon. The fact is of great interest in either view.

We close this article by an interesting extract from Hegesippus, a contemporary writer, born in the time of Trajan, which throws light upon the general condition of the Christian Church, at the beginning of the second century. It is found in immediate connection with the death of Simeon, whose martyrdom was occasioned by the accusations of certain heretics. Relating the events of those times, he says "that the church continued until then as a pure and uncorrupt virgin; whilst if there were any at all that attempted to pervert the sound doctrine of the saving gospel, they were yet skulking in dark retreats. But when the sacred choir of the apostles became extinct, and the generation of those that had been privileged to hear their inspired wisdom had passed away, then also the combinations of impious error arose, by the fraud and delusions of false teachers. These also, as there was none of the apostles left, henceforth attempted without shame, to preach their false doctrine against the gospel of truth."

The period of transition from the personal superintendence of inspired to that of uninspired men, must have been indeed a most critical period in the history of the church. But blessed be God, as Christ bequeathed his spirit, so the apostles bequeathed us their writings, to guide the church forever!